

Thursday, January 4, 1951

DUXBURY CLIPPER

Old Ford Store, Which Dated Back to 1826, Burned In 1921

The historic store on the "Plymouth Road" in Duxbury that dated back to 1826, where Dan Webster bought his rum and groceries, burned down at 1:45 a.m. on Oct. 13, 1921. The oldest department store in the United States, it had been owned by the Ford family ever since it had been established by Nathaniel Ford & Son in 1826. Used as a trading center, it was leased to J. P. Boyle when it burned to the ground.

ALMOST A TOTAL LOSS

Conditions were ripe for a historic tragedy. The store was heated by two wood stoves, and its timbers were saturated with oil and other inflammables which had been stored there for years. There was practically no fire insurance, thus it was nearly a total loss. Mr. Boyle said both fires were out when he closed up at 8 p.m. the night before. Nobody has ever determined the cause of the fire which brought the fire department to the scene as rapidly as possible.

Among the irreplaceable objects that were burned was Daniel Webster's saddle, which he used when he rode over to the store from his home less than two miles away in Marshfield. Also burned were some of his clothing and the old records of the store which included Webster's account with the storekeeper.

The building, a hundred feet long and a story and a half high, was typical of New England architecture. It was built of hand-hewn timbers, wooden pegged. One window on the second floor, which once harbored a tailor shop, a millinery parlor and a hat factory, had two panes of real Sandwich glass. Originally established by Nathaniel Ford to deal in English and West Indian goods, it had for years been the largest store in New England and the center for trading activities in imported goods for the eastern part of the U. S. Its business boomed at the time of the clipper sailing ships, which carried the American flag into every corner of the globe. Goods imported from all over the world came for the most part in clippers owned by "King Caesar" Ezra Weston, then the No. 1 ship owner in the country.

FATHER OF

DEPARTMENT STORES

Known as "the father of all department stores," the old Ford emporium was the first in America to sell and display various commodities separately. In boom years it did an annual business of \$200,000-a-year—big money then. Tourists flocked from points as far removed as Florida, Texas and California to visit the place. It was highlighted in guide books and in historical narratives, largely because of its associations with Dan Webster who did most of his shopping there. His accounts, with his hat, clothing and saddle were on exhibition when the store burned. In an old iron chest that had not been opened for 45 years until a few days before the fire, were found many interesting ledgers of the 1830's.

The fire was discovered by a dog owned by Win Delano, who lived on Crab Island on land originally granted his ancestors by the Pilgrims. The dog woke Mrs. Delano who immediately notified the fire department. Fire Chief H. E. Merry, enroute from New Brunswick, read about the fire in the Boston Herald the next morning. (It was his first vacation in 14 years). One man who helped fight the fire was William Redmond of Bay Road.

Before the Fords bought the place in 1826 and operated it under the name of James T. Ford & Co., it had been owned and operated since 1770 by a man named Harlow. Since no railroad reached Duxbury until 1873, for many years the Harlow store, twice a year, transported all its goods by its own packets from Boston to Duxbury Beach. There it was picked up and transported a mile

or so to the store. Meanwhile, the stage coach of Sprague & Jones, who drove the stage, used to say he could remember the destination of all packages up to 50.

Still in existence are many of the old books of the Harlow concern, including the first account book with all the entries legible. The amount of rum consumed in those days was impressive. According to the entries in the ledger, every customer ordered a plentiful supply of rum with each order of groceries.

AN 1826 ENTRY

In 1826 Joseph Simmons bought four gallons of molasses for \$1.35; 14 pounds of sugar, \$1.61; two pounds of tea, \$1.12; one gallon of New England Rum, 38 cents; one quire of paper, 20 cents; two pairs of shoes, 98 cents; two papers of needles, 14 cents; one-quarter pound of tobacco, five cents. Imagine! In 1826 you could buy a gallon of rum for 38 cents and a pair of shoes for about 50 cents.

In 1927 Cyrus Churchill paid six cents for two glasses of wine and John Oldham paid 38 cents for 4½ pounds of sage cheese at the Old Ford Store. Eleazar Harlow, in preparation for the Fourth of July, invested 20 cents in a quart of West India rum and 25 cents in a quart of Holland gin. Jacob Weston and Benjamin Cushman bought hats. Jake paid \$3.75 for his; Ben, known as a contemporary dandy, paid \$7.

Dan Webster, who enjoyed hanging around the Ford Store, often helped handle boxes and bales. Here's one legend told in Duxbury that concerns him:

"Take a hold, Mr. Webster, give us a lift, will ye?"

"Certainly," was the reply; and Daniel Webster tilted his high beaver hat on the back of his leonine head and helped the storekeeper hoist a box of Havana sugar in to the store.

GOODS SOLD

In the Old Ford Store you could buy logwood, plows, aloes, flaxseed, hay cutters, Epsom salts, whale oil, camphor, elm bark, tents, rugs, chrome yellow, nuts, pepper, brimstone, wigs, pimento, white glue, nutmegs, tapioca, sago, shells, wax, night caps, shoes, candles, pills, nails, Bibles, powder and shot, codfish, dress goods, hoopskirts and fish hooks.

The inventory included East Indian and Oriental luxuries shipped in on Ezra Weston's packets, whom even Dan Webster respected and considered the largest shipowner and builder in the country. (At one time 25 ships were being built in various yards in Duxbury for King Caesar Weston). You could buy colored china ware imported from Hongkong, brocades from Canton, spices from the East Indies and tea from Japan. You could buy gin from Jamaica and oranges from the West Indies. No wonder the store attracted such notables as Adelaide Phillips, the opera singer whose summer home was next to Webster's place in Marshfield.

The store was a meeting place for town affairs. Just outside its doors folks gathered to discuss the latest political developments. On "Sabbath eve" Jake Brewster, a wandering minstrel, would play his violin. "Jake was purty near as handsome as my hound," an old native said, "but his fiddlin' got 'em all." Nancy Alden, then the belle of Duxbury, said of Jake: "He is cross-eyed, bow-legged and hed headed, but I love him madly."

That 1921 fire was the most tragic that ever hit Duxbury.

Here is an editorial written in 1921 (before the fire) in the Boston Post:

IT IS THE OLDEST

The ancient and honorable town of Duxbury, in this Commonwealth claims possession of the oldest department store in the United States, located on the main shore road between the town and Marshfield. And it certainly bears evidence of extreme age. Some put its birth back in the late 17th century; its records, however, date only to 1826; it is evidently much older than that.

However, the claim of the Duxbury establishment to being the oldest department store in the land needs verification. All country stores were and still are department stores, the modern emporium is merely an enlargement and glorification of the ancient rural place of barter and purchase. The United States is dotted with these well stocked shops where everything from plows to neckties is carried, although in recent years the competition of the great mail order houses has put many of them out of commission, more's the pity. It is sad to see a picturesque and useful institution like the country store vanish from the earth.

But to return to the Duxbury establishment, Duxbury folk will have to prove that theirs is the oldest country store in New England before they can be said to have made out a case as to priority in the department store business. Can they do that?

FORD'S STORE



Ford's Store, Situated On Tremont Street, Milbrook Until Early 1800's, Was Destroyed By Fire In 1920. Ford's Was America's First Department Store.